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The Biblical Basis of LGBTQ+ Community Inclusion

Genesis 19:1-11 (Dr. Lisa Davison's translation)

Rev. Kelley L. Becker

It has been a beautiful week in Bartlesville OK. It has been colorful and loud and filled with good music, laughter, and incredible courage. At the Pride Picnic, I talked to more than a handful of people who told me that yesterday came along just in time to give them hope and to remind them that they are not alone. And they were definitely not alone. Because I'm a preacher and preachers notoriously guess that more people are in a given space than really are, I won't guess how many people attended the picnic, but it was a lot. The Disciples Christian Church booth was well-attended. The volunteers who staffed our booth applied temporary tattoos and painted rainbow-colored fingernails. Callie talked to many, many young people who were super excited to hear about our Connections youth group that centers on justice and inclusion. DCC was well-represented and, I think it's worth noting, DCC was the only church that sponsored the event and the only church with a booth. Bartlesville needs this church. Thank you for being the church God has called us to be.

I titled this sermon Translation and Interpretation Still Matter for two reasons. First, I recognize that, throughout this *You Asked For It* sermon series, we've talked a lot about interpretation and the importance of recognizing that everyone interprets what they read. Even the people who claim the Bible is the literal, inerrant word of God, interpret what they read. Second, the debate in Christian communities about whether or not homosexuality is a sin hinges on how ancient texts are translated and how those translations are interpreted. So, yes, translation and interpretation still matter...a lot.

Before I read today's story, I want to remind you of another story, the one that comes right before the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. This first story will help us set the stage for the second one.

Abraham was sitting at the entrance to his tent when he was had three visitors. The narrator of the story knows they are divine messengers, God and two angels. Abraham does not. To Abraham, they were three traveling strangers. Abraham

bowed to them, offered them water, the chance to wash their feet, and a place to rest. He also offered them bread to eat.

The visitors took Abraham up on his offer. Abraham out did himself though. He went into the tent and directed Sarah, his wife, to make cakes from the best flour and he went out to his herd and chose a calf and told his servant to prepare it. The original offer of a little bread and water turned into a feast with cakes, meat, curds, and milk. The visitors were served the feast and Abraham stood by as they ate what had been prepared. This is an example of over-the-top hospitality. Hospitality has high value in the Jewish tradition.

God came with a message for Abraham that day. The message was that Sarah would have a son. It is important to note, Abraham and Sarah were not young people. They weren't even middle-aged people. Sarah was in the tent and overheard what God said to Abraham, and she laughed, and God heard her. Sarah said she didn't laugh, but God said, "Oh yes, you did laugh." The couple eventually had a baby named Isaac whose name means "one who laughs."

After this exchange, the visitors left Abraham's home and started walking toward Sodom. Abraham, again a very gracious host, walked along with them for a while. Because God had chosen Abraham as the patriarch of God's people, God confided in him, "how great is the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and how very grave their sin! I must go down and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me; and if not, I will know." At this point, the two angels with them continue the journey to Sodom and God and Abraham stopped to talk.

The gist of the conversation is that Abraham feared God was planning to do away with everyone in Sodom and he wanted to know if God would be merciful to the people who were righteous or would God just wipe them all out. And the two begin to haggle, which was customary in the Middle East. Abraham wanted to know, what if there were 50 righteous men in Sodom, or 40 or 30 or 20 or 10? Would God destroy the city, including them? And God's final word, "For the sake of the 10 I will not destroy it." And God went on God's way.

Meanwhile, the angels made their way to Sodom and that is where we pick up today's text. I am reading Phillips Theological Seminary Hebrew Bible and Hebrew

language professor, Rev. Dr. Lisa Davison's translation of the story. As I am reading it, I would like you to think about two things:

First, how is this story like the story of Abraham I just told? And second, how is Dr. Davison's translation different from translations you have heard or read in the past?

1The two messengers came to Sodom in the evening, while Lot was sitting at the gate of Sodom. Then Lot saw and arose to greet them, he bowed his face to the ground. 2Then he said, "Please my lords, turn to the house of your servant, spend the night, and wash your feet. Then you may arise early and be on your way." But they said, "No, in the square we will spend the night." 3He urged them strongly, so they turned to him and came to his house. He made for them a feast and baked unleavened bread, and they ate. 4At evening they lay down, when the people of the city, the people of Sodom from the youngest to the eldest, all the people of Sodom to the last one, surrounded the house. 5They called out to Lot and said to him, "Where are the persons who came to you tonight? Bring them out that we may know them." 6Then Lot went out to them to the entrance and shut the door after him. 7And he said, "Please, my friends, do not do such evil. 8Look, I have two daughters, who have not known a man, let me bring them out to you and you do to them whatever you wish, only to these persons do not do anything, for they have come under the shelter of my rafter." 9But they said, "Stand back!" Then they said, "This one came as a sojourner and now he would judge us. Now we will do worse to you than them." And they pressed hard against Lot, and they drew near to break the door. 10But the persons inside reached out their hand and brought Lot to them into the house and shut the door. 11Then, the people who were at the entrance of the house were struck with blindness, the youngest to the eldest, so that they could not find the door.

Dr. Davison's translation ends there, but the story continues with Lot and his wife and daughters' dramatic exit, "Then the Lord rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulfur and fire from the Lord of heaven and he overthrew those cities and all the Plain and the inhabitants of the cities and what grew on the ground," and Lot's wife dared to look back at what they were leaving and was turned into a pillar of salt.

The next day, Abraham looked over in the direction of Sodom and Gomorrah and saw nothing but smoke. The narrative block ends with this, "So it was, that when God destroyed the cities of the Plain, God remembered Abraham and sent Lot out

of the midst of the overthrow; when he overthrew the cities in which Lot had settled.”

I asked you to think about how the story of Abraham and this story of Lot are similar. I hope you picked up on the ways in which both Abraham and Lot welcomed and cared for their visitors. Again, hospitality is a big deal in the Jewish tradition. Both Abraham and Lot opened their homes, provided food, and a safe place to rest for the visitors. In Lot’s story, though, the safe place quickly became dangerous.

This brings me to the second question I asked you to think about, “How is Dr. Davison’s translation different from translations you have heard or read in the past?”

You probably noticed something different in verse 4, “At evening they lay down, when the people of the city, the people of Sodom from the youngest to the eldest, all the people of Sodom to the last one, surrounded the house.”

Let’s compare that to some the New Revised Standard Translation, which generally is the translation we use in worship. Here is verse 4 in the New Revised Standard Version, “But before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house...” There is a pretty important difference between the two version, wouldn’t you say? Who exactly surrounded the house? All the people or just the men? Dr. Davison’s translation says “the people of Sodom, from the youngest to the oldest...” while the NRSV says, “the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, surrounded the house.” The other translations I checked, the King James Version and the New International Version, both used the word, “men,” instead of people.

This matters. If there were men and women in that crowd, then using this text to illustrate what God thinks of homosexuality doesn’t make much sense, does it? So, here is the rationale behind Dr. Davison’s translation which makes sense to me, especially because of the way this story has been understood in the Jewish tradition. The Hebrew word for man is *’ish*. The masculine plural form of *’ish*, is *anashim* and that is the word translated here as “men,” although, the root of the word is *anush*, which means, “human.”

Here's the important thing, though, the Hebrew word *anashim* is very often used to describe a group of people that includes men and women, but in English it traditionally has been translated in the masculine form, rather than the gender-neutral form. Think of it in terms of using the word *mankind*. We understand *mankind* to mean all humans, but *mankind*, literally understood is masculine. You many have noticed that the word *humankind* is often substituted for *mankind*. We know better, so we do better.

Dr. Davison's explanation of her translation rings true to me, not only because she is an extremely gifted scholar, but because within the Jewish tradition this text has not been as a critique of homosexuality and it is, first and foremost, their text. Recall that, in the biblical narrative, God was on to Sodom's bad behavior before this incident took place. In the Jewish tradition, and throughout both the Hebrew Bible and New Testament, Sodom and Gomorrah's downfall had nothing to do with homosexuality, but with inhospitality, greed, idolatry, and injustice.

For example, in Jeremiah 50, the prophet, in an address about the injustice in Babylon, writes, "As when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah and their neighbors, says the Lord, so no one shall live there, nor shall anyone settle in her." And in the New Testament, in Luke 10, Jesus was talking to his disciples about hospitality and told them, "But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say, ¹¹ 'Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you...' ¹² I tell you, on that day it will be more tolerable for Sodom than for that town." Nowhere in the Bible is there a mention of this story having anything to do with a condemnation of men having sex with men. Nowhere.

And really, isn't it just stunning that, for centuries, Christians have been more interested in talking about the desires of the violent crowd in this story than they have been in talking about the actions of a father who was willing to hand over his daughters to appease the violent crowd? I wonder how the world would be different had people of faith been disgusted by that? The point of the story, though, is that God is disgusted when we are inhospitable to each other, when we deny each other justice, when we use violence to get what we want.

There is an early rabbinic legend that Dr. Davison uses to help us understand how the Jewish tradition sees Sodom and its inhabitants. It's about two girls. The Readers Digest version is this:

The first girl was starving, so the second girl gave her some flour for making bread. When the people of Sodom found out about this act of generosity, they burned the compassionate girl alive. Nice people, huh?

The people of Sodom had a reputation, but it was not for being gay, it was for being selfish, cruel, and violent. And those are the things that go against who and what God created us to be. Being gay or lesbian or bi or trans does not.

The truth is, the way in which Christians have understood this text was influenced significantly by Augustine in the 4th and 5th centuries. His writings influenced the development of western philosophy and Western Christianity. If you have never read his work, what I can tell you is that he was really interested in sin. I mean really interested. In fact, we have him to thank for the doctrine of original sin, which continues to be taught and used to make people believe we are born into this world wretched sinners. I don't like Augustine's brand of Christianity very much and, honestly, his view of God doesn't present a god I want much to do with.

You see, the God I serve creates amazing human beings, with purpose and potential, each one uniquely beautiful. The God I serve does not create wretched human beings who come into the world sinful. The God I serve did not wipe out Sodom and Gomorrah at all. This is a story passed down through generations to teach God's people about the dangers of not welcoming strangers, denying others justice, and treating other people as less than human. And maybe to explain why there is a strange salt sculpture near the Dead Sea. The God I serve loves you and loves me. And God rejoices when we love each other, no matter who we love. Love is love. Loving, consensual relationships are honored by God, and they should be honored by the church as well. I can promise you, they are honored and celebrated at this church, in this beloved community. Pride week is over, but in this place, love always, every day in every way wins. Amen.